

The finish line

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

Last week was my two-year anniversary with the *Sentinel* and I did nothing to celebrate or even acknowledge it. These weekly columns have become less of a job and more of a ritual for my final stages and that time is coming sooner than you think.

A curious thing happened last week when I learned that local theatrical producer Steve Silver died. I knew he was sick but for some reason when I read that he "passed away from complications due to AIDS ..." a familiar numbness swept over my imagination and the disease itself became a caricature worthy of one of the outrageous hats from his musical review. I have heard the word AIDS so much it doesn't seem real sometimes. For a few moments I literally imagined Steve passing away, that eternal euphemism for death. It didn't even register until later that his apartment was probably filled with the same pills, that he may have had many of the same treatments, been through much of the same disease angst as myself. Yet, in that moment of reading about it, I too, was swept into that pretend passing-away world of soft-peddled death.

It would be unthinkable to print the real story of his, or anyone's last weeks, and months, except mine of course. Illness and death are

so many eulogies and obituaries shamelessly lie about the dearly departed? Where were all those angels and saints when they were living? Why can't we celebrate someone's averageness or asshole-ness when they die instead of glorifying what they never were?

I have chosen to tell my AIDS story because we are in the middle of a devastating epidemic that has ravaged the soul of this community for a decade and a half and few have come out about their real AIDS story. I know my personality and occasional eccentric side serve as a distracting device to make my common AIDS story more palatable.

I have also subtly woven my spiritual and philosophical sides in between the lines of my ridiculous humor and quirky writer's persona; not to deceive anyone, but it's always a crashing bore to be too preachy. One has to be sneaky about speaking the truth. To leave out my spiritual side would have been a sin of omission and robbed you of some insight into my

tried to offer more questions than answers.

To this late day, I am still reformulating my understanding of the world, my place in that world, and the universal question of how one can hold comforting thoughts in the mind while the body is wracked with pain. It helps to keep searching, questioning and going even deeper into the dilemmas of life until the answers feel so sure and unshakable that you know it's time to go back to square one again!

There is something so deeply human about those of you who have followed my difficult story. I know it hasn't been everyone's cup of tea. It saddens me that I am not able to meet all the people who have reached out to me. I have so little physical energy left these days I can't even answer your letters — please understand.

In earlier days I would have lunch with all of you just for the asking. On my bad days, I'm so weak I can't move from a chair or reach for the ringing phone. You might not be able to help me out of a chair, but just knowing I am in your thoughts is healing indeed. I hope that when you think of your offers to me you extend them to all the other men and women with AIDS in this town. Because I use my life as a backdrop for larger issues, I don't always update you on the particulars of my life, but let me reassure you,

anyone is a pettiness not worthy of your higher self, so swallow your pride; they won't let you into heaven with it, anyway.

The extensive KS in my lungs has spread internally. If it gets worse I'll have it radiated or risk not being able to walk. It's too late for the charms of alternative medicine. I cough continuously a



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few hundred times a day. Last week I threw up my lunch after gagging so much, but some newly prescribed liquid morphine seems to be helping. The secretions created by the lesions will produce constant wheezing and gurgling of lung fluids for the rest of my life.

I am up half the night coughing and spitting colorful gunk into white Kleenex all night, which appear the next morning to be pillows of fluffy clouds stained with secretions — I keep hoping I died and went to heaven. I can't rest comfortably in my

sleep sitting upright in bed because the fluids level out and create further coughing. I wake up exhausted in the morning amidst a huge entanglement of sheets and blankets. Some days I am too tired all day to straighten it out and crawl under this mound the next evening, praying for a good night's sleep.

I had the KS on my face and hand radiated. It is painless, but because of my own fears around radiation, I could have had it done earlier and didn't. Radiation is no big deal. Despite being realistic about my approaching demise, I continue to do my treatments and take all my medications. Because my bone marrow is not functioning, I give myself 17 injections a week for a blood transfusion and will work very well with chemo. Of course I am leery about starting chemo, but it sure beats joining that militant DNCB cult. I'm in enough pain these days. I need proof, not promises, before I'll burn my skin for science.

Don't give up — it all sounds worse than it is. You will jump hurdles when you come to them and do it well, my friend. I will give you more than a red AIDS ribbon when you win. I'll be waiting for you on the other side with a smile and a big hug. We'll finally have a heavenly lunch together and dish this damn disease forever!

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